DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 380 981 EC 303 857

TITLE	Graduation Requirements for Certain Students with Disabilities. Technical Assistance Paper.
INSTITUTION	Florida State Dept. of Education, Tallahassee. Bureau of Education for Exceptional Students.
PUB DATE	Jun 94
NOTE	8p.
PUB TYPE	Legal/Legislative/Regulatory Materials (090)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Standards; *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; Employment Experience; *Graduation Requirements; State Regulation; *State Standards
IDENTIFIERS	*Florida

ABSTRACT

This paper is designed to assist school district personnel in implementing revised Florida regulations concerning student performance standards and graduation requirements for Special Diplomas for certain exceptional students. The revised regulations call for provision of a diploma option based upon demonstrated employment and community competencies; development of a training plan to implement the new diploma option; documentation of the student's intent to pursue a course of study leading toward either a Standard or Special Diploma by eighth grade or age 16; and identification of levels of performance standards for students with mental handicaps, hearing impairments, physical impairments, language impairments, emotional handicaps, specific learning disabilities, and profound handicaps. A background section provides a brief historical perspective and an overview of applicable statutes and rules. A question and answer section responds to common concerns about student mastery of the performance standards, incorporation of the performance standards into curricula, establishment of credit requirements, components of the training plan required under the Employment and Community Competencies option, and selection of the appropriate diploma option for an individual student. (JDD)

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TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PAPER

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
DIVISION OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS
BUREAU OF EDUCATION FOR EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS

No.FY 1994-12 June, 1994 "PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY G. M. Duncan TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"	Graduation Requirements for Certain Students with Disabilities	Refer Questions to: Michele Polland (904) 488-1106; SC 278-1106 or Hope Nieman (904)488-1216; SC 278-1216

ED 380 981

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this technical assistance paper is to assist school district personnel in the implementation of the 1994 revisions to Rule 6A-1.0941, FAC, Minimum Student Performance Standards, and Rule 6A-1.0996, FAC, Graduation Requirements for Certain Exceptional Students. Revisions to these rules were adopted by the State Board of Education on May 24, 1994, and became effective on June 14, 1994. Copies of these rules are included in Appendix A.

The Background section provides a brief historical perspective and an overview of applicable statutes and rules relating to the current and revised student performance standards (previously known as the minimum student performance standards) for students with disabilities and the awarding of Special Diplomas. The Questions and Answers section responds to commonly asked questions relating to student performance standards and graduation requirements for a Special Diploma.

For additional information on the student performance standards, please refer to the following documents:

- *Minimum Student Performance Standards for Florida Schools, 1985-86 through 1995-96, Exceptional Students* (Current Student Performance Standards)
- *Student Performance Standards for Florida Schools, 1996-97 through 2000-2001, Exceptional Students* (Revised Student Performance Standards)
- *Student Performance Standards for Florida Schools, 1996-97 through 2000-2001, Exceptional Students: Tracking Form*

BACKGROUND

The Florida Legislature created s. 232.247, F.S., to provide students with certain disabilities the option to graduate with a Special Diploma. Students eligible to receive a Special Diploma include students identified as educable mentally handicapped, trainable mentally handicapped, hearing impaired (deaf and hard of hearing), physically impaired, specific learning disabled, emotionally handicapped, language impaired, and profoundly handicapped. (i.e. includes profoundly mentally handicapped, autistic, dual sensory impaired, and severely emotionally disturbed)

EC 303857

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PAPERS are produced periodically by the Bureau of Education for Exceptional Students to present discussion of current topics in the education for exceptional students. The TA Papers may be used for inservice sessions, technical assistance visits, parent organization meetings, or interdisciplinary discussion groups. Topics are identified by district personnel, individuals, or from program compliance monitoring.

Rule 6A-1.0996, FAC, Graduation Requirements for Certain Exceptional Students, was adopted by the State Board of Education in October, 1988, to implement the statute on awarding Special Diplomas. The rule specified that graduation requirements for a Special Diploma would be based on mastery of the appropriate set of minimum student performance standards and meeting the credit requirements identified in the district's pupil progression plan.

Revisions to Rule 6A-1.0996, FAC, Graduation Requirements for Certain Exceptional Students, are as follows:

- addition of students identified as language impaired to the groups of students eligible to receive a Special Diploma;
- provision of a second Special Diploma option based upon demonstrated employment and community competencies, and development of a training plan to implement the option;
- permission for school boards to adopt levels of student performance standards for students with disabilities that are higher than those specified in the rule;
- requirement that the individual educational plan (IEP) committee shall document on the IEP whether a student is pursuing a course of study leading toward a Standard or Special Diploma. The decision regarding the diploma option must occur during the student's eighth grade year or prior to the student's 16th birthday, whichever comes first. The recommendation shall be reviewed annually;
- requirement that the district's pupil progression plan specify the Special Diploma graduation requirements;
- identification of levels of current and revised student performance standards for students identified as educable mentally handicapped, trainable mentally handicapped, hearing impaired (deaf and hard of hearing), physically impaired, language impaired, emotionally handicapped, specific learning disabled, and profoundly handicapped; and
- identification of effective dates for the current and revised student performance standards.

Minimum Student Performance Standards for Exceptional Students, 1985-1996

The Educational Accountability Act of 1976, in ss. 229.565 and 229.57(2), F.S., mandated the development of minimum student performance standards for certain groups, including exceptional student education. In 1977, minimum student performance standards were adopted for basic education and for students identified as educable mentally handicapped, trainable mentally handicapped, and hearing impaired, in grades 3, 5, 8, and 11. Implementation of these standards was later delayed until 1985.

Rule 6A-1.0941, FAC, Minimum Student Performance Standards, adopted these standards. Based on a ruling in the Debra P. vs. Turlington case, the effective date for implementing the standards was delayed until 1986 to give school districts additional time to incorporate the standards into curricula before granting students Standard or Special Diplomas.

Subsequently, students identified as physically impaired, language impaired, emotionally handicapped, specific learning disabled, and profoundly handicapped were provided with the opportunity to earn a Special Diploma using the three existing sets of standards referenced above.

Rule 6A-1.0941, FAC, was revised in 1994 to extend these standards through the 1995-96 school year. The term "minimum" was deleted from "minimum student performance standards" to be consistent with current terminology. These standards are referred to as the "current student performance standards" in this technical assistance paper.

Revised Student Performance Standards for Exceptional Students, 1996-2001

In the mid-1980s, the Bureau of Education for Exceptional Students began revision of the minimum student performance standards for exceptional students. The new standards, based on five functional levels in the content areas of reading, writing, language, mathematics, and social and personal skills, were developed to replace the current standards when they expire in 1996. In 1994, Rule 6A-1.0996, FAC, was revised to adopt the specific functional levels in each of the five content areas for students identified as educable mentally handicapped, trainable mentally handicapped, hearing impaired (deaf and hard of hearing), physically impaired, language impaired, emotionally handicapped, and specific learning disabled, as a requirement for graduation with a Special Diploma. Students identified as profoundly handicapped may use any set of standards, as specified in the individual educational plan, as a requirement to receive a Special Diploma.

The revised student performance standards must be incorporated into curricula several years before students are required to demonstrate mastery of the standards as a requirement for a Special Diploma. **Therefore, it was necessary to extend the current standards through the 1995-96 school year.** Students graduating in 1996-97 will be the first group of students for whom graduation will be based upon the revised student performance standards. During the 1994-95 school year, these students will be enrolled in the tenth grade.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Student Performance Standards

1. **Must students master 100% of the student performance standards as a requirement to receive a Special Diploma?**

   Yes. Students must demonstrate mastery of all student performance standards. The district's pupil progression plan must indicate how student mastery of these standards will be determined (see Question 2).

2. **How should mastery of the student performance standards be determined?**

   As indicated in Question 1, mastery of student performance standards is typically based upon demonstrated mastery of a specified percentage of skills within a standard as indicated in the district's pupil progression plan. Mastery of skills is determined by the student's teacher through the use of formal assessments, teacher-made tests, or teacher observation. If formal assessments or teacher-made tests are used, administrators may wish to maintain copies of the tests on which mastery of standards and skills is determined for administrative verification. The State, however, does not require school districts to maintain copies of instruments used to determine mastery.

3. **How should the mastery of standards be documented?**

   The district's pupil progression plan should specify the process and procedures for documenting individual mastery of student performance standards. Written documentation of the student's mastery of standards should be maintained by the school district until the student graduates. The documentation forms may be kept in teachers' classrooms or placed in the students' records. Documentation must minimally include the date each standard was mastered and sign-off by the teacher who verified mastery.

4. **Must students graduating under the current student performance standards demonstrate mastery of the student performance standards at grades 3, 5, 8, and 11, or only the grade 11 standards, as a Special Diploma graduation requirement?**

Students graduating prior to the 1996-97 school year under the current standards must demonstrate mastery of only the appropriate set of grade 11 standards as a graduation requirement for a Special Diploma. Documentation of mastery at grades 3, 5, and 8 should be maintained for instructional purposes.

5. Have the revised student performance standards been developed for grades 3, 5, 8, and 11?

No. Revised student performance standards have been developed only for students exiting grade 12. In preparation for mastery, appropriate prerequisite skills related to these standards should be incorporated into curricula at all grade levels.

6. When should the revised student performance standards be incorporated into curricula?

Beginning with the 1994-95 school year, the revised student performance standards or prerequisite skills must be incorporated, as appropriate, into curricula for students currently in kindergarten through the eighth grade. Districts must ensure that the standards are taught before students are required to demonstrate mastery of the standards as a graduation requirement.

7. May school boards change the levels of the student performance standards for students with disabilities?

School boards may raise the levels of student performance standards for students with disabilities. When standards are raised, they should be raised for all students within an exceptionality (e.g., all students identified as specific learning disabled). A district school board may decide to raise the levels of standards in one or more content area (e.g., for students identified as specific learning disabled, raise the level of performance in reading from Level V to Level VI). This change must be reflected in the district's pupil progression plan. Districts may not establish lower levels of standards.

Graduation Requirements for a Special Diploma: Option 1 (Based on Student Performance Standards)

8. What are the requirements for a student to graduate under Option 1?

Graduation under Option 1 is based upon mastery of the current or revised student performance standards (depending upon the year in which the student will graduate) and earning the minimum number of course credits, as specified by the district school board.

9. When are the revised student performance standards in effect as a requirement for graduation with a Special Diploma?

The revised student performance standards are in effect for students graduating in the 1996-97 school year. These students will be in the tenth grade during 1994-95.

10. Which student performance standards are required for students graduating before the 1996-97 school year?

Students graduating with a Special Diploma prior to the 1996-97 school year must master the appropriate set of current student performance standards. These standards are specified, by exceptionality, in Rule 6A-1.0996, FAC.

11. Has the state established minimum course credit requirements for students earning a Special Diploma under Option 1?

No. Each district school board establishes its own credit requirements, both number and types of credits, for students to earn a Special Diploma. These requirements must be

specified in the district's pupil progression plan. The requirements should address the needs of all students with disabilities who are eligible to receive a Special Diploma. Districts may develop different graduation requirements for students with mild, moderate, and severe or profound disabilities, corresponding with the courses (curriculum frameworks) that are appropriate for each group.

Graduation Requirements for a Special Diploma: Option 2 (Based on Employment and Community Competencies)

12. What are the requirements for graduation under the Employment and Community Competencies option?

The student must be successfully employed in the community for a minimum of one semester, at or above minimum wage, to graduate under this option. Many students are likely to be employed in their jobs for two or more semesters, ensuring successful job performance. The student must achieve all of the annual goals and short term objectives related to employment and community competencies specified on the Transition IEP. In addition, the student must demonstrate mastery of the competencies specified in the training plan. Students must be at least 16 years of age.

13. Must school districts provide both Special Diploma options specified in paragraph (1) of Rule 6A-1.0996, FAC?

No. The rule states that school boards **may** offer both Special Diploma options. When both options are provided, school boards shall develop procedures for students moving between the options.

14. What is the training plan that is required under the Employment and Community Competencies option and what are its components?

The training plan is a written implementation plan which describes, in detail, how this Special Diploma option will be implemented for an individual student. The training plan should also describe the level of support to be provided to enable the student to successfully live and work in the community.

The required components of the training plan are as follows:

a. the competencies the student is expected to demonstrate related to employment, including employability/job skills, as well as skills that support the student's employment (e.g., using public transportation and grooming and hygiene skills);

b. the pertinent competencies needed by the student related to living in the community (e.g., money management skills and shopping);

c. the criteria to be used to determine and certify the student's mastery of the employment and community competencies;

d. the work schedule and the minimum number of hours to be worked per week (Note: the student is expected to work full time (i.e. more than 20 hours per week) unless physically or emotionally incapable as a consequence of the student's disability); and

e. a description of the student's supervision related to employment to be provided by school district personnel, including where and frequency.

15. Is the training plan required under this option different from the training plan required in vocational education?

Yes. While there are some similarities between both plans, the training plan required under this option has additional components.

16. **Who must participate in the development of the training plan?**

The training plan must be developed and signed by the student, the student's parent and teacher, and the employer, prior to the student's placement on the job. If the student is 18 years of age, or older, the parent is not required to sign the training plan.

17. **What is the relationship of the training plan to the Transition IEP?**

The training plan should correspond to and support the annual goals and short term objectives in the Transition IEP, but at a greater level of specificity. The training plan should be specific regarding the employment and community competencies related to the transition activity areas (i.e., instruction, community experiences, employment, post-school adult living, and if appropriate, daily living skills).

18. **Is it necessary for school districts to establish credit requirements for students graduating under the Employment and Community Competencies Special Diploma option?**

It is a district decision as to whether credit requirements are established for students graduating under this option.

19. **What does the statement "paid a minimum wage in compliance with the requirements of Fair Labor Standards Act" under the Employment and Community Competencies option mean?**

Students must be paid at least the established minimum wage. Employment in a sheltered workshop, at a sub-minimum wage level, is not acceptable under Option 2.

20. **Which students may be most appropriately served under Option 2?**

Option 2 may be appropriate for students who are at risk of dropping out of school and for students who would benefit from an individually designed, community-based job preparatory program.

Graduation Requirements for a Special Diploma: General

21. **In order for students identified as physically impaired to be eligible to receive a Special Diploma, is it still required that the students have a "seriously impaired ability to communicate orally or in writing?"**

No. All students with physical impairments are eligible to receive a Special Diploma if the IEP committee determines that this option is most appropriate.

22. **How does a district determine which students with a language impairment are eligible for a special diploma?**

A student with a severe language impairment could exhibit 2-3 or more years delay in receptive and/or expressive language skills which necessitates enrollment in a special program for students with language impairments. The language problem would interfere with communication and have a profound effect on learning and educational progress. There may be little or no usable language and a severe deficit in speech sound production. The IEP committee determines that this option is most appropriate.

23. If a student graduates under the Employment and Community Competencies option and subsequently loses the job, may the student be readmitted to school to work toward graduation under Option 1?

No. A student who has received a Special Diploma has graduated from secondary school.

24. May a student who has received a Special Diploma enter an adult education program to earn a Standard Diploma or Graduate Equivalency Diploma GED?

Yes. A student may continue to work toward graduation requirements for a Standard Diploma or a GED in an adult education program.

25. How is the diploma option selected?

The decision regarding whether a student chooses a course of study leading to a Standard or Special Diploma must be made by the IEP committee during the student's eighth grade year or the year prior to the student's 16th birthday. Districts are encouraged to involve parents in this decision whether or not they attend the IEP meeting. Parents must again be notified in writing of the diploma options available under this rule prior to administration of the tenth grade High School Competency Test (HSCT). Students who are working toward a Special Diploma are not required to take the HSCT.

26. May a student move between Standard and Special Diploma options and between the two Special Diploma options?

Yes. A student may move between the Standard and Special Diploma options and between the two Special Diploma options. The rule requires districts to develop procedures for students moving between the Standard and Special Diploma options. When both Special Diploma options are provided, the district must develop procedures to describe how students move between these options. These procedures shall be included in the district's pupil progression plan.